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SUBJECT: PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN JORDAN, PART 3: THE
CYCLE OF POVERTY

REF: A. AMMAN 1466
[1](#)B. AMMAN 391
[1](#)C. UNRWA REPORT - "A SOCIO-ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF
SPECIAL HARDSHIP CASE FAMILIES" (2006)
[1](#)D. AMMAN 670
[1](#)E. AMMAN 815
[1](#)F. AMMAN 1724
[1](#)G. AMMAN 1725

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Note: This is the third of a four-part series of cables examining the world of Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps. Part one focused on the different categories of refugees, and the basic structure of the camp system as it exists in Jordan. Part two examined the isolation of the camps - how they are largely separate from Jordanian society, politics, and economics. Part three will look at the economic situation of the camps and their inhabitants, particularly in light of recent strains on Jordan's economy. Part four will examine Islamist politics and extremism in the camps. These cables are the result of focus group meetings with diverse residents of nine camps in Jordan. End Note.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary: Poverty is an all-encompassing issue that defines Jordan's refugee camps. Rising prices impact all Jordanians, but the residents of the camps feel their effects acutely, especially in terms of the cost of land and health care. Lack of opportunity is frequently cited as the main reason that the camps remain centers of poverty - a situation exacerbated by the lack of education, societal discrimination, and exodus of skilled workers. Poverty is the only force that keeps people in the camps. Some are eligible for government or UNRWA assistance, but that help is both inflexible and insufficient. The complicated land ownership system in the camps is another damper on economic advancement. Those camp residents who do succeed in life do so in spite of their situation, not because of it. End Summary.

The Cycle of Poverty

[1](#)3. (C) In Jordan, there are no official signs or other markers that delineate most refugee camps from the urban neighborhoods that surround them. It is poverty that defines the borders of Jordan's refugee camps - a recognizable shift from the middle class to the lower class. Contacts in the camps use a common set of adjectives to describe their economic situation - low, hard, desperate, difficult. "Poverty is everywhere in Jordan. But in the camps, it is one hundred percent," says a resident of the Al-Husn camp, near Irbid.

[1](#)4. (C) Jihad Thaher, UNRWA's area officer for the Zarqa district, notes that the people in the camps are by definition the poorest of the poor. Those who have the income stream necessary to support their families in the outside world will immediately seek a life outside of the

camp. Since the camps are already overcrowded, the shelters of those who move into the middle class are usually turned over to the ever-expanding families who are too poor to break the cycle of poverty.

Inflation Takes Its Toll

15. (C) There is plenty of angst across the board in Jordan about the rising cost of living, and for the residents of the camps, it is an enormous part of their daily struggle. "Most families are sleeping without heaters so they can buy bread," says Ibrahim Natour, of Jebel Hussein camp. Said Ajawi, of Irbid camp, cites a recent string of suicides to demonstrate the difficulty that people are facing. Residents of the Zarqa camp told us that their neighbors are buying livestock and raising them in the streets of the camp - an option, they say, that ultimately proves cheaper than buying meat in local markets. Suleyman Abu Taheiner, a resident of the unofficial Sukhna camp, says, "I said to the meat in the supermarket: 'Goodbye, I can't afford you anymore.'"

16. (C) Facing the rising cost of health care is a particularly acute problem in the camps. Residents of Zarqa and Sukhna camps spoke about the increasing reliance of camp residents on the basic health system of UNRWA, which provides care and pharmaceuticals free of charge to registered refugees. Due to the lack of full access to Jordanian health services caused by their citizenship status, the people of the camps used to bear the full cost of their treatment at government or private hospitals - a bill they can no longer afford to pay (Ref A). "We go to UNRWA's clinics because we

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can't afford any other treatment," says Furejat Um Yazan, a resident of the Sukhna camp. UNRWA's Jihad Thaher sees an alarming uptick in the number of patients using the agency's health system due to economic conditions, and fears an overload. He says that on average, the staff of UNRWA's small Zarqa clinic now see up to 110 patients per day.

17. (C) The skyrocketing cost of land and rising consumer prices in Jordan are causing young people in the camps to postpone marriage. Buying a house outside of the camp has always been a challenge, but now it is almost impossible for newlyweds with one or even two entry-level incomes to start a life for themselves in the current economic climate. Abu Ra'ed Darash, a resident of Zarqa camp, explained the situation of his thirty-six year old son, who has been engaged for years, but is unable to seal the deal because he does not have the financial wherewithal to find housing or provide for a family. Ayman Al-Burini, a student from Zarqa camp, says that many of his friends face a similar situation.

18. (C) An experienced hand with over twenty-five years as an UNRWA staffer, Thaher says that he has never seen the economic situation in the camps decline so rapidly and so far. He believes that the true impact of rising prices in Jordan has so far been masked by the tight social and economic networks of the camps, but fears for the future. "People start to rely on their relatives for help. Then they move to the neighbors. Pretty soon the neighbors who were giving ten percent of their income to others can't afford it anymore," he says.

The Cost of Opportunity

19. (C) Contacts within the camps are unanimous in their diagnosis of the reason they remain trapped in a cycle of poverty. They consistently and vocally assert that economic opportunities are simply not available in Jordan for Palestinians. Notwithstanding the fact that the private sector in Jordan is dominated by Palestinians, many talk about the lack of work in the public sector as a function of officially sanctioned prejudice against Palestinians. Jihad,

a student from Baqa'a camp, posits that "East Bankers can find work easily. Palestinians can't. We can't join the army. We can't join the civil service. Palestinians have no wasta ('connections')." Sheikh Qteishat, also of Baqa'a camp, complains that "the only job available, even for highly qualified Palestinians from the camps, is to sweep the streets of Amman."

¶10. (C) Residents of the camps speak often about a brain drain and how it impacts the economic and social life of the camps. For educated sons and daughters of the camps, the lack of employment opportunity in Jordan often means finding a job in the gulf or further afield. Salam Hamdan of Jebel Hussein camp says that "people from the camps are very successful when they pursue their careers in the gulf countries. But not one of them is a success here in Jordan. It's impossible." As a result, many in the camps are dependent on remittance income - a subject that will be treated in more detail septel.

¶11. (C) Unskilled workers from the camps are most often employed in the agricultural or construction sectors. These jobs often require them to commute long distances for salaries that are unable to support large families. The recent lifting of fuel subsidies in Jordan has led to a corresponding rise in the price of public transportation - a system that refugees rely on heavily to get to work. Residents of Sukhna camp say that many of their neighbors (particularly women) work in the local Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) as garment workers. The minimum wage salaries (110 JD, or 154 USD per month) are insufficient, and most of the workers tack on as much overtime as they are allowed in order to make ends meet.

¶12. (C) Some people from the camps also point out that their lack of full Jordanian citizenship often prevents them from investing in land and property that would serve as a financial refuge in times of need. The convoluted property system of the camps (see paragraph 20) exacerbates this problem. Zughd Al-Houli, a resident of the Sukhna camp, drew the distinction between East Bankers who, she argued, are able to live the "Jordanian dream" of home ownership and the residents of the camps who live a hand-to-mouth existence, largely without access to credit or other equity-building devices.

¶13. (C) In addition to the lack of jobs, opportunities for camp residents in the Jordanian education system are few and far between. Sheldon Pitterman, who served until recently as UNRWA's Jordan Director, notes that only 300 tuition-free

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slots in Jordanian universities are designated for students from the camps. Since many of these students have less than full Jordanian citizenship, they are frequently ineligible for scholarships and must pay full tuition. The main consequence of this systemic bias against Palestinian refugees is that increasingly, the people of the camps are without skills and connections necessary to gain employment. Residents of Jerash camp, who are mostly former Gazans without Jordanian citizenship, relay that work in the informal sector or seasonal employment - jobs in construction and agriculture - are the only reliable source of employment for many in the camps. "The big problem for us is unemployment," says Salam, a resident of Jerash camp. "With nothing else to do, the unemployed are just hanging around on the streets of the camp."

Should We Stay Or Should We Go?

¶14. (C) Poverty is the only reason that people remain in the camps - there is little to no emotional attachment to the land or even the people that keeps refugees inside the camps. Said Ajawi echoes the constant refrain of our contacts when he says, "if people in the camps earn enough money, they buy

land outside the camps and leave." Land and housing prices in Jordan have increased steadily since 2003, making it increasingly difficult for camp residents and average Jordanians to invest in real estate. The lack of outflow means a corresponding increase in the already crowded conditions that prevail in all of Jordan's refugee camps.

¶15. (C) Structures in the camps (many of which were designed to be temporary) are coming to the end of their natural lives. Walking through the narrow lanes of the camps is a study in crumbling facades, piles of rubble, and buildings that have seen better days. Residents of the camps are eager to renovate, but are too poor to afford it. This, along with the convoluted property ownership system (see paragraph 20), contributes to the feeling of destitution and despair within the camps.

¶16. (C) Camp residents tell us that one of the effects of the unemployment and poverty in the camps is an increased focus on the right of return (Ref B). Said Ajawi warns that with increasing prices in Jordan, residents of the camps are looking more and more towards Palestine itself as an alternative to residence in Jordan - it is becoming more politically attractive, but most of all camp residents see it as cheaper. "Palestinians who live outside of the camps are thinking long term - they're thinking about building their lives. People here in the camps are thinking about Palestine." A resident of Jerash camp told us that he had no choice but to look for alternatives to his current situation: "We don't have jobs, or even national numbers. What is the future for my kids in this country?"

Welfare Sheikhs

¶17. (C) Some residents of the camps are eligible to receive financial aid from the Jordanian government. Yet the existence of different gradations of Jordanian citizenship (Ref A) mean that this assistance is uneven. People from the camps are unanimous in their verdict: aid from the Jordanian government is not enough, and its value is constantly decreasing as inflation rises. Afaf Mejdelawi, a housewife from the Zarqa camp, points out that the large families of the camps who are eligible for government assistance receive only a pittance from the government - 36 JD (USD 43) per month, per person.

¶18. (C) Approximately fourteen percent of refugees who live in camps in Jordan are part of UNRWA's "hardship case" program, created in 1978 to help the neediest people who fall under the agency's care. These refugees meet strictly defined criteria of poverty, and receive additional assistance. The assistance is meager, however - only 7 JD (USD 9.80) per month. With the recent rise in consumer prices, refugees are forced to stretch this additional money even further. Note: The hardship case program is currently under review, and may eventually include other forms of assistance such as employment services and direct food aid in the future. End Note. UNRWA's Pitterman complains that the government always sees monetary support for Palestinian refugees as "additional" to that of UNRWA, which it holds responsible for the refugees' primary care.

¶19. (C) The Gazan residents of Jerash camp are in a particularly tight spot economically. Refugees from the West Bank, who are often Jordanian citizens, have access to government health care and other vital services. The people of Jerash camp, on the other hand, are entirely dependent on

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UNRWA. The only aid they receive from the government of Jordan is a quarterly donation of 200 packets of groceries from the King. The packets, which contain around 100 JD (140 USD) of food, reach only a small minority of the 28,000 people who live in the camp. Jihad Thaher, UNRWA area officer for Zarqa, says that the agency has a preferred

hiring program for refugees from Gaza in recognition of their inability to access the services of the Jordanian government.

As a result, Jordan's UNRWA employees are disproportionately of Gazan origin.

Land Ownership: Down the Rabbit Hole

¶20. (C) A major factor that impacts the financial security of camp residents is the convoluted property ownership system. When the camps were founded in the early 1950s and late 1960s, the Jordanian government leased the land for the camps rather than buying or expropriating it. Over the years, Jordan has maintained lease payments to these landowners for the camps, some of which now occupy urban land that is worth millions of dollars. Note: The high cost of maintaining these leases over the years is one of the main factors in Jordan's quest for governmental compensation as part of any solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. End Note. The primary consequence of this system for the residents of the camps is that they cannot buy the land on which they live and work. While they wait for a solution, residents of the camps are trapped in a financial gray area.

¶21. (C) Residents of the camps cannot buy the property they live on, but they do technically own the structures they inhabit. Yet there is a further complication that derives from the system of registering deeds and ownership changes in these structures. UNRWA, not the Jordanian government, holds the documents that register ownership of the structures in the camps. These pseudo-deeds have not been updated since the founding of the camps - the original owners of the structures from the camp's founding are listed on all of the deeds. Yet the structures in the camps have changed hands many times since then; nearly all of the houses and businesses in the camps are occupied by people who are not the original owners listed on the registration documents.

¶22. (C) In the absence of an official registration process, an informal system of ownership change has blossomed in the camps. Residents of several camps told us that larger families are often unable to find sufficient housing, and are forced to swap with people in other camps, creating a de facto property exchange market between the different camps. When camp residents want to buy, lease, or trade a structure in the camp, they come to an agreement with the owner, and exchange what amounts to a promissory note. Each structure in the camps has a chain of promissory notes that traces back to the original "ownership" document on file with UNRWA.

¶23. (C) The legality of this system is unclear, and as a consequence Jordanian courts are inundated with property disputes from the camps. The director of Al-Husn camp told us that in the end, "we have many problems determining the ownership of buildings," and that many of the buildings are tied up in endless legal battles over the validity of promissory notes. There is a project in the works to create an electronic record system for property in the camps, but UNRWA officials say that the system is in its infancy. Note: During our visit to Souf camp, an official from the Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA) who sat in on our meeting was accosted by a man engaged in a complicated property dispute. End Note. As a consequence of this situation, refugees in Jordan are the least likely of all UNRWA areas of operation to own their own homes (Ref C).

Against the Odds

¶24. (C) Many of our contacts in the camps assert that Palestinians will succeed despite their difficult economic situation. They point to the many professionals and businessmen who are still considered "sons of the camps" - people who have broken the cycle of poverty and made their communities proud. Yet this sentiment is often qualified by the notion that success will only come if the social and political structure of Jordan allows people of the camps room to flourish. A resident of Baqa'a camp told us, "you will

only extend your legs as far as the blanket will cover them."

Ibrahim Natour, of Jebel Hussein camp, is proud of the successful businessmen who have emerged from the camps over the years. "We are self-made people," he says. "Can the children of (the wealthy Amman district of) Abdoun study by candlelight?" Comment: While the socio-political situation in the camps exacerbates the cycle of poverty, the rising cost of living in Jordan impacts East Bankers as well.

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Residents of the camps often view their situation through a narrow lens, but fail to grasp the rural poverty in Jordan that reflects their own plight. End Comment.

Hale